

MULTIPURPOSE METHOD FOR CONSTRUCTING AN ERROR-CONTROL CODE
FOR MULTILEVEL MEMORY CELLS OPERATING WITH A VARIABLE NUMBER
OF STORAGE LEVELS, AND MULTIPURPOSE ERROR-CONTROL METHOD
USING SAID ERROR-CONTROL CODE

5 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a method for constructing a multipurpose error-control code for multilevel memory cells operating with a variable number of storage levels, and to a multipurpose error-control method using said error-control code.

10 In particular, the present invention regards the definition of error-control codes for multilevel semiconductor memories and, more precisely, the definition of multipurpose linear block codes that enable error detection and correction in multilevel memories, maintaining the functionality thereof with memory cells operating with a different number of storage levels.

15 Description of the Related Art

As is known, thanks to the evolution of technological processes that make it possible to manufacture elementary devices of ever smaller dimensions, in the last few years semiconductor memories have been produced that have very high storage capacities.

20 A further increase in storage capacity has been achieved by resorting to multilevel storage, which makes it possible to increase the storage density, given the same technological generation. In fact, with this technique a number of information bits are stored within the individual memory cell normally used for storing a single bit.

25 It is moreover known that, in order to read a two-level memory cell (storing 1 bit), an appropriate electric quantity, linked to the state of the cell, is compared with a reference value, and, according to the outcome of the comparison, it may be determined whether the memory cell contains a logic "0" or a logic "1".

In the case of cells that are able to store r bits, reading is carried out by comparing the electric quantity correlated to the state of the cell with 2^r-1 reference levels. The outcome of the comparisons enables determination in which of the 2^r intervals allowed the cell is found, and consequently reconstruction of content of the cell in terms of binary information.

The multilevel approach can be applied both to volatile memories (such as DRAM memories) and to nonvolatile memories (such as EEPROM and Flash memories). In either case, the increase in the number of bits per cell renders more critical the tolerance to disturbance, the retention of the information and the accuracy of the operations of reading and writing. In addition, the increment of the storage capacity demanded by the market tends to reduce the overall reliability. For these reasons it is envisaged that the use of error control codes will be fundamental above all for high capacity multilevel memories.

At the moment, commercially available memory devices with larger capacities contain some hundreds of millions of bits, and in the next few years it is forecast that memory devices with ever-increasing capacities will become available.

The increase in the number of cells tends to reduce the mean time to failure (MTTF) of the entire memory device. However, given the need to create increasingly reliable equipment or systems, the level of reliability required for the individual memory component becomes increasingly stringent. For this reason, dedicated design techniques are adopted allied to careful quality control on the production processes in order to prevent or reduce failures.

However, malfunctioning of the memory chip cannot be eliminated completely and can be reduced only at the expense of a reduction in performance or an increase in costs.

A very effective way to increase reliability is represented by the design of memories immune from error using error-control codes, that is, codes that are able to detect and correct errors in the data stored in memories.

In particular, codes with correction of single error, or detection of double error and correction of single error, are used in semiconductor memory devices of various

- types. In this connection, see, for example, K. Furutani, K. Arimoto, H. Miyamoto, T. Kobayashi, K.-I. Yasuda, and K. Mashiko, "A Built-in Hamming Code ECC Circuit for DRAM's", IEEE J. Solid-State Circuits, Vol. 24, No. 1, Feb. 1989, pp. 50-56, and T. Tanzawa, T. Tanaka, K. Takeuchi, R. Shirota, S. Aritome, H. Watanabe, G. Hemink, 5 K. Shimizu, S. Sato, Y. Takeuchi, K. Ohuchi, "A Compact On-Chip ECC For Low-Cost Flash Memories", IEEE J. Solid-State Circuits, Vol. 32, No. 5, May 1997, pp. 662-669.

The errors in the memories are normally classified as "soft" errors and "hard" errors. By "soft" error is meant a random, non-repetitive and non-permanent change in the state of a cell. "Soft" errors are caused by occasional electrical noise or are 10 induced by radiation (α particles, cosmic rays, etc.), regard a very limited number of cells at a time, and may be recovered in the next writing cycle.

By "hard" error is instead meant a permanent physical failure associated to faults present in the device or created during its operation owing to incapacity of the materials to withstand the stresses applied. Generally "hard" errors are much rarer than 15 "soft" errors.

Error-control codes enable drastic reduction in the effects of "soft" errors, which represent the more serious problem of the two, especially for multilevel memories. They can moreover prove useful also for the purpose of recovering some "hard" errors.

To protect the information to be stored in the memory it is necessary to add, 20 to the bits that form each information word, a certain number of control bits, appropriately calculated. The operation that associates to each information word a precise value of the control bits is called *encoding*. The control bits calculated by the circuit that carries out encoding must be stored together with the information word.

Each word stored will be subsequently read together with the control bits 25 that pertain to it. The *decoding* circuit is able to detect and correct a certain number of erroneous bits per word by appropriately comparing the value of the control bits with the value of the information bits.

The number of control bits that it is necessary to add to each information word is determined according to the length of the information word itself and the number of errors per word that it is desired to correct.

More in general, error-control encoding can be extended from the binary alphabet (containing only the two symbols "0" and "1") to a more extended alphabet containing q symbols. In this case, encoding consists in the addition of a certain number of symbols (no longer of bits) to each word to be stored, and the correction of the errors consists in the correction of the erroneous symbols.

This extension to the q -ary case is particularly suited to multilevel memories, in which each memory cell is able to store more than one bit (for example r bits). In this case, in fact, malfunctioning of one memory cell may degrade the value of all the bits stored in it. It is consequently more convenient to associate, to each block of r bits stored in a single cell, a q -ary symbol, *i.e.*, one belonging to an alphabet constituted by $q=2^r$ different symbols. Each symbol is consequently stored in a different multilevel memory cell. In this way, each information word of k bits is viewed as a word formed by k/r q -ary symbols (equal to the number of memory cells that form each word), and the correction of a symbol is equivalent to the correction of all the r bits associated to it.

It is desirable that error-control methods integrated in a semiconductor memory satisfy three basic requisites:

the time required for the encoding operation and for the decoding operation (including error detection and correction) should affect the access time to the memory only to a minimum extent;

the additional area due to the encoding and decoding circuits and to the control cells should be minimized; and

the technique used should at least guarantee the correction of any type of error on the individual cell, which, in the case of multilevel cells, may consist of the error on a number of bits.

For the encoding and decoding times not to degrade the access time, the typical approach is to use parallel encoding structures or matrix structures, which offer the

highest computation speeds. For a more detailed treatment of the subject, see, for example, C.V. Srinivasan, "*Codes For Error Correction In High-Speed Memory Systems - Part I: Correction Of Cell Defects In Integrated Memories*", IEEE Trans. Comput., Vol. C-20, No. 8, August 1971, pp. 882-888.

5 As regards, instead, the second point, the area is minimized by choosing codes with characteristics suitable for the application and appropriately optimized.

The last point is finally guaranteed by the use of q -ary codes, which enable detection and correction of the errors on the memory cells, irrespective of the number of erroneous bits associated to each of them.

10 The multilevel memories designed to contain r bits per cell can, however, also operate by storing a smaller number of bits per cell. In this case, for writing and reading, it is possible to use a subset of the 2^L-1 reference levels available. The extreme (and simplest) example of this operating condition is obtained when a multilevel memory is used as a normal two-level memory.

15 The choice of decreasing the number of levels reduces the storage capacity of the memory but increases its reliability. For example, in the case of nonvolatile memories, the reduction in the number of the levels enables guaranteeing the retention of the information for a longer time and in more unfavorable environmental conditions.

20 Normally, the choice of the operating modality is made in a permanent way by the manufacturer; in this case, the possibility referred to above may be interesting, for example, to obtain a memory with a smaller number of bits per cell as a subselection of one designed to contain a greater number of bits, in order to obtain an overall reduction in costs.

25 At present, however, to satisfy the growing demands of the market, memory devices are being designed in which also the end user can decide the operating modality on the basis of the type of use of the device, and there is consequently increasingly more felt the need to provide a multipurpose error-control method that is able, using the same circuits, to protect the data stored in cells that operate with a different number of levels.

This need is further strengthened by the fact that the memory devices of the coming generations, with large storage capacities, will be able to be configured sector by sector, and consequently will have internal sectors containing a different number of bits per cell (see, for example, US patent US 5,574,879).

5 Memory devices of this type will, for example, be able to be used in multimedia cards, enabling storage of the microcode for the microprocessor that manages the card in sectors with a low number of bits per cell, and storage of the user data in sectors with a high number of bits per cell.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

10 An embodiment of the present invention provides a method for constructing an error-control code for multilevel memory cells operating with a variable number of storage levels, and a multipurpose error-control method using said error-control code, which enable, employing the same circuits, protection of the data stored in cells that operate with a different number of levels.

15 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWING(S)

For a better understanding of the present invention, a preferred embodiment thereof is now described, purely by way of non-limiting example and with reference to the attached drawings, in which:

20 Figures 1, 2 and 3 show tables corresponding to a construction method according to the present invention;

Figures 4a, 4b and 5a, 5b show multiplier circuits used for the implementation of an error-control method according to the present invention;

Figure 6 shows a flowchart of the operations corresponding to the construction of an error-control method according to the present invention;

25 Figure 7 shows a block diagram representing the encoding, storage and decoding operations of an information word regarding a non-multipurpose error-control code according to the prior art; and

Figure 8 shows a block diagram representing the encoding, storage and decoding operations of an information word regarding a multipurpose error-control code according to the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

5 To facilitate understanding of the present invention, introduced hereinafter is some notation corresponding to a linear block encoding used by the present invention for detecting and correcting errors in multilevel memories. For a more detailed treatment of this subject, see, for example, W. W. Peterson, E. J. Weldon, *Error-Correcting Codes*, 2nd ed., M.I.T. Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1972, and R. E. Blahut, *Theory and Practice*
10 *of Error Control Codes*, Addison-Wesley, Reading (Massachusetts), 1983.

In particular, we shall call q -ary symbols the elements of an alphabet containing q different symbols, we shall call *information word* the vector of k q -ary symbols to be written in the memory and we shall indicate said vector as follows:

$$\mathbf{i} = (i_1, i_2, \dots, i_k)$$

15 In linear block encoding, the information word is mapped biuniquely in a vector of n q -ary symbols (with $n > k$), which we shall call *code word* and indicate as follows:

$$\mathbf{c} = (c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n)$$

The encoding operation can be described in algebraic form by introducing
20 the matrix \mathbf{G} , called *generating matrix* of the code (see, in this connection, W. W. Peterson, E.J. Weldon, *Error-Correcting Codes*, 2nd ed., M.I.T. Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1983).

Each code word \mathbf{c} can be generated simply by multiplying the information word by the generating matrix, as expressed in the following equation:

25
$$\mathbf{c} = \mathbf{i} \cdot \mathbf{G}$$

where \mathbf{i} and \mathbf{c} are row vectors.

The matrix \mathbf{G} is a rectangular matrix with k rows, n columns and rank k (for the application $\mathbf{i} \rightarrow \mathbf{c}$ to be injective).

For each linear code (n, k) there exists a matrix \mathbf{H} , called *control-of-parity matrix* (see the aforementioned text *Error-Correcting Codes*), having $n-k$ rows and n columns, such that:

$$\mathbf{G}'\mathbf{H}=\mathbf{0}$$

5 where $\mathbf{0}$ indicates the matrix $k \times (n-k)$ with all zero elements, and \mathbf{H}' indicates the transpose of the matrix \mathbf{H} .

The $n-k$ symbols, added during encoding, take the name of *parity symbols* or *control symbols*.

We shall call q -ary code (n, k) the set of the q^k code words obtained by
10 encoding all the possible information words, and we shall define *capacity of correction* of the q -ary code (n, k) the number t of errors (i.e., of erroneous q -ary symbols) per word that the code is able to correct.

The inequality below, known by the name of Hamming limit (see the
aforementioned text *Error-Correcting Codes*), provides the minimum number of parity
15 symbols required for a q -ary linear code (n, k) to have correction capacity t :

$$q^{n-k} \geq \sum_{i=0}^t \binom{n}{i} (q-1)^i \quad (1)$$

In the light of the notation introduced above, there follows the description of the procedure for constructing the generating matrix of a b^s -ary code (n, k) , such that the same matrix may be utilized also for carrying out the operations of encoding and decoding
20 for a b -ary code (n, k) having the same correction capacity as the starting code. In this way, a single encoding circuit and a single decoding circuit are obtained that can be used for both the codes.

In particular, with the sole purpose of facilitating the understanding of the problem of construction of the generating matrix, the application of the method according
25 to the present invention will now be illustrated with a specific example, which in any case does not limit the applicability to the general case, and subsequently the feasibility of what has been illustrated in the specific example will be demonstrated in rigorous terms.

Consider, for example, the case of a 16-level memory that may be used also as a 4-level memory. The aim is to provide a error-correction circuit that is able to correct errors that involve groups of 4 bits associated to the same memory cell. At the same time, the circuit must be able to carry out the correction also in the 4-level modality, *i.e.*, to correct errors that involve groups of 2 bits associated to the same memory cell.

Suppose that for the application to which the code is destined it is sufficient to correct only one error per word ($t=1$) and that each information word, in the 16-level operating modality, is formed by 16 hexadecimal symbols ($k=16$, $b^s=16$), whilst in the 4-level modality, it is formed by 16 quaternary symbols ($k=16$, $b=4$).

First of all, it is necessary to evaluate the number of parity symbols required in both of the operating modalities, resorting to the Hamming limit. In this case ($k=16$, $t=1$), thanks to relation (1) it is found that, both in base 16 ($q=16$) and in base 4 ($q=4$), 3 parity symbols are required (consequently, $n=19$). The generating matrix of the code in base 16 that can be used also as generating matrix of the code in base 4 can be obtained in the way described in what follows.

First, the generating matrix of the code in base 4 is constructed that satisfies the initial requisites for the values of n , k and t . In the example considered, a quaternary matrix that satisfies the requisites specified can be obtained by abbreviating the Hamming code (21, 18) in base 4 (for the definitions of Hamming code and of the abbreviation operation, see the aforementioned *Theory and Practice of Error Control Codes*). An example is provided by the following matrix:

$$G_1 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 3 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 2 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 3 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 2 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 3 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 2 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 3 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 & 3 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 3 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$$

Now we seek to convert the quaternary matrix G_1 into a hexadecimal matrix, which will generate a code in base 16 with the same correction capacity as the initial quaternary code (referred, however, to hexadecimal symbols).

- 5 The aim is to find the right biunique correspondence between the quaternary elements $\{0, 1, 2, 3\}$ and four of the hexadecimal elements $\{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, A, B, C, D, E, F\}$. The four hexadecimal elements corresponding to the quaternary elements $\{0, 1, 2, 3\}$ are referred to as elements *isomorphic* to the quaternary elements $\{0, 1, 2, 3\}$.

- 10 The correspondence must be such as to provide a matrix which, when used in 4-level modality, will generate code words that contain only the four hexadecimal symbols chosen.

There follows a description of how to obtain the correspondences that satisfy this condition for the general case.

- 15 In the specific case taken as example, there exist two biunique correspondences that enable a correct conversion of the generating matrix G_1 :

$$\begin{array}{ll} 0 \leftrightarrow 0 & 0 \leftrightarrow 0 \\ 1 \leftrightarrow 1 & 1 \leftrightarrow 1 \\ 2 \leftrightarrow 6 & 2 \leftrightarrow B \\ 3 \leftrightarrow 7 & 3 \leftrightarrow A \end{array}$$

- 20 In other words, according to the first correspondence, the hexadecimal elements that are isomorphic to the quaternary elements $\{0, 1, 2, 3\}$ are respectively $\{0, 1,$

6, 7}, whilst, according to the second correspondence, the hexadecimal elements that are isomorphic to the quaternary elements {0, 1, 2, 3} are respectively {0, 1, B, A}.

Using the first correspondence, as generating matrix we obtain:

$$G_2 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 6 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 7 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 6 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 7 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 6 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 7 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 6 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 6 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 6 & 6 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 6 & 7 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 & 7 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 7 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$$

5 Since the digital circuits that carry out encoding and decoding operate in binary logic, it is necessary to describe the operations that regard the matrix G_2 in terms of binary operations. In addition, the hexadecimal elements must be treated exploiting their binary notation.

10 The matrix G_2 thus obtained is able to operate in 4-level and 16-level modality, given that in 4-level modality the quaternary symbols (*i.e.*, the pairs of bits) are mapped in hexadecimal symbols (*i.e.*, in groups of 4 bits) following the same biunique correspondence used for obtaining the matrix. In this case:

$$00 (=0) \leftrightarrow 0000 (=0)$$

$$01 (=1) \leftrightarrow 0001 (=1)$$

15 $10 (=2) \leftrightarrow 0110 (=6)$

$$11 (=3) \leftrightarrow 0111 (=7)$$

The encoding and decoding circuits always require the same number of input bits and always furnish the same number of output bits, irrespective of whether the operating modality is a 16-level one or a 4-level one. In the case of 4-level operation of the

memory, it is the task of particular circuits that precede the encoder and that follow the decoder to map each quaternary symbol (formed by 2 bits) in the corresponding hexadecimal symbol (formed by 4 bits). In particular, the network that precedes the encoder converts groups of 2 bits into groups of 4 bits according to the correspondence referred to above, whilst the network that follows the decoder carries out the conversion of groups of 4 bits into groups of 2 bits, again according to the same correspondence. A more detailed explanation of this aspect of the invention will be given in what follows with reference to Figures 7 and 8.

The aim is now to illustrate in rigorous terms the feasibility of what has just been set forth as regards the aforementioned specific example.

In particular, the demonstration that follows will take into consideration the binary base; *i.e.*, it will be explained how to obtain a biunique relation that enables conversion of b -ary elements into b^s -ary elements, with $b=2$.

What has been said regarding the case $b=2$, however, is applicable as such to the conversion of b -ary elements into b^s -ary elements for any value of b .

To carry out this rigorous illustration it is indispensable to recall some notions of algebra of finite fields.

We shall indicate by $GF(q^s)$ the *Galois* field (*i.e.*, the finite-element field) containing q^s elements (for a detailed treatment of the subject see the aforementioned *Theory and Practice of Error Control Codes*).

Since $GF(q^s)$ is a finite field; multiplying one of its elements β by itself a certain number of times we obtain again β . We define as *order* of β the minimum integer for which $\beta^i = \beta$ (for a detailed treatment of the subject see the aforementioned *Error-Correcting Codes*).

Given two fields $GF(q^s)$ and $GF(q^r)$, it can be shown that $GF(q^r)$ is a *subfield* of $GF(q^s)$ if and only if s is divisible by r . In this case, $GF(q^s)$ is called the *extended field* of $GF(q^r)$.

It can be shown that a q -ary linear block code (n, k) is a vector subspace of dimension k of the n -dimensional vector space constructed on $GF(q)$.

Within each field $GF(q^s)$ there exist q elements that constitute the subfield $GF(q)$ with the same operations defined in $GF(q^s)$. The elements of $GF(q)$ are the only elements that in $GF(q^s)$ have the order q .

In each Galois field $GF(q^s)$ there exists a particular element α , called
5 *primitive element*, having order q^s . Multiplying α by itself, all the other elements of the field are obtained except for the zero. Consequently, expressing the elements of $GF(q^s)$ as powers of α , it is possible to recognize the elements of the subfield $GF(q)$, since these are the elements 0, 1 and the other elements of $GF(q^s)$ having an order equal to the elements of $GF(q)$, i.e., the terms with exponent equal to $(q^s-1)/(q-1)$, $2(q^s-1)/(q-1)$, ..., $(q-2)(q^s-1)/(q-1)$.

10 Both to highlight a biunique correspondence between the elements of a field $GF(q^s)$ with those of the subfield $GF(q)$ and to obtain a description in binary form of the operations to be carried out during encoding and decoding, it is useful to resort to the polynomial description of the Galois fields.

A polynomial $p(x)$ of degree r on $GF(q)$ is a polynomial in the unknown
15 quantity x the coefficients of which and the known term of which are elements of $GF(q)$.

The operations between two polynomials on $GF(q)$ coincide with the usual operations between polynomials, with the exception that the sums and the products between the coefficients are made in $GF(q)$.

Each extended field $GF(q^s)$ can be generated starting from the subfield
20 $GF(q)$, resorting to the polynomial representation. There exists in fact at least one polynomial of degree s on $GF(q)$, thanks to which it is possible to construct the field $GF(q^s)$. This polynomial is a *primitive polynomial* of $GF(q)$ (for a detailed treatment of the subject, see the aforementioned *Theory and Practice of Error Control Codes*).

Thanks to the primitive polynomial, each element of $GF(q^s)$ can be
25 represented in q -ary form by means of a polynomial on $GF(q)$ of degree $(s-1)$, and the operations in the extended field $GF(q^s)$ can be obtained by the operations of addition and multiplication between polynomials on $GF(q)$.

To convert a matrix on $GF(q^s)$ into a matrix on $GF(q)$ it is sufficient to have available a representation of $GF(q^s)$ on $GF(q)$ and a representation of $GF(q^s)$ on $GF(2)$.

Setting $q=2^r$, the first representation can be obtained by means of a primitive polynomial of degree s on $GF(q)$, whilst the second can be obtained by means of a primitive polynomial of degree sr on $GF(2)$.

In the specific example described previously, the following were used: the
 5 representation of the field $GF(16)$ on $GF(4)$ obtained with the quaternary polynomial $p_1(x)=x^2+x+2$, the representation of the field $GF(16)$ on $GF(2)$ obtained with the binary polynomial $p_2(x)=x^4+x+1$, both shown in the table of Figure 1, and the representation of the field $GF(4)$ on $GF(2)$ obtained with the binary polynomial $p_3(x)=x^2+x+1$, appearing in Table II of Figure 2.

10 In particular, in Table I, the hexadecimal notation associated to the corresponding binary polynomial notation is none other than the representation in hexadecimal base of the coefficients of the unknown terms of the respective binary polynomial. In other words, for each of the binary polynomials, a binary word is formed with the coefficients of the various terms of the binary polynomial, and this binary word is
 15 converted into the hexadecimal base, thus obtaining the corresponding hexadecimal notation.

Likewise, in Table II the quaternary notation associated to the corresponding binary polynomial notation is none other than the representation in quaternary base of the coefficients of the unknown terms of the respective binary
 20 polynomial.

From an examination of Table I, it is possible to recognize the elements of $GF(16)$ that are elements of $GF(4)$. In exponential notation these correspond to the elements 0, 1, α^5 and α^{10} , whilst in hexadecimal notation (obtained from the binary polynomial notation by converting into hexadecimal base the coefficients of the
 25 polynomials associated to each polynomial) these are the elements 0, 1, 6 and 7.

In particular, it may be noted how, apart from 0 and 1, the association of which is evident and immediate, both α^5 and α^{10} have multiplicity four, and hence the binary polynomial representations of $GF(16)$ on $GF(2)$ and of $GF(4)$ on $GF(2)$ are not alone sufficient for establishing whether the exact correspondence is $2 \rightarrow 6$ and $3 \rightarrow 7$ or

2→7 and 3→6. However, through the polynomial representation of $GF(16)$ on $GF(4)$, the correct association is automatic, as shown in Table I.

It can be shown that, once n , k and t are fixed, if the Hamming limit defined by the relation (1) is satisfied for $q = p'$, then the same limit is satisfied also for $q = p'^s$ (with p prime, and r and s positive integers).

Consequently, it is always possible to convert the generating matrix of a linear block code (n, k) on $GF(p')$ into the generating matrix of a linear block code (n, k) on any extended field $GF(p'^s)$.

The extension can be made by mapping each element of $GF(p')$, which appears in the starting matrix, in the corresponding element of the extended field. The correspondence between the elements of the two fields is expressed in the representation of $GF(p'^s)$ on $GF(p')$, alongside which is to be set a representation of $GF(p')$ on $GF(p')$, which enables the performance in p -ary logic of the operations of encoding and decoding.

In particular, for each linear block code on $GF(2'^s)$ the operations of encoding and decoding can be done in binary logic, resorting to the binary polynomial representation of the elements of the field.

The generating matrix obtained generates a code (n, k) on $GF(p'^s)$ that is *isomorphic* to a code (n, k) on $GF(p')$ having at least the same correction capacity as the code on the extended field. It is thus possible to exploit the same encoding and decoding circuits for words with the same number of symbols on $GF(p')$ or on $GF(p'^s)$.

To make the encoding and decoding circuits in binary logic it is necessary to have a description of the operations of $GF(p'^s)$ in terms of operations between bits. Resorting to the representation in binary-polynomial form, in each *Galois field* with a number of elements equal to a power of 2 it is possible to carry out all the operations of addition and multiplication between the elements of the field by means of the operations of addition and multiplication in $GF(2)$. Such operations coincide, respectively, with the logic operations of *exor* (exclusive or) and of *and*.

Each operation of addition between two elements of $GF(2^m)$ can be consequently performed simply by making in $GF(2)$ the $m+1$ additions between the coefficients of the terms of equal degree of the two polynomials.

The multiplication of an unknown element $w(x)$ of $GF(2^m)$ for a given element $e(x)$ of the same field can be done in binary form resorting to the polynomial representation in the following way:

$$y(x) = R_{p(x)}\{w(x)e(x)\} = y_{m-1}x^{m-1} + y_{m-2}x^{m-2} + \dots + y_0$$

where the coefficients y_i are binary coefficients, $p(x)$ is the primitive binary polynomial with which $GF(2^m)$ is constructed, and $R_{p(x)}\{g(x)\}$ indicates the remainder of the division of the polynomial $g(x)$ by the polynomial $p(x)$.

At this point, it may be noted that the circuit implementation of the blocks which carry out the multiplications for the elements of the generating matrix other than 0 and 1 changes as the primitive binary polynomial used for representing the extended field varies. For instance, returning to the example examined previously, the binary-polynomial representation of the field $GF(16)$ obtained by means of the polynomial $p_4(x) = x^4 + x^3 + 1$, appearing in Table III of Figure 3, requires a different number of logic gates both for carrying out the multiplication by α^5 , and for carrying out the multiplication by α^{10} .

In fact, to carry out the multiplication of an unknown element γ by α^5 , in the case in which the polynomial representation appearing in Table I is chosen, we proceed as follows:

$$\gamma = \gamma_3x^3 + \gamma_2x^2 + \gamma_1x + \gamma_0$$

$$\gamma \cdot \alpha^5 = R_{p_2(x)}\{\gamma_3x^5 + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_2)x^4 + (\gamma_2 + \gamma_1)x^3 + (\gamma_1 + \gamma_0)x^2 + \gamma_0x\}$$

where $R_{p_2(x)}\{g(x)\}$ indicates the remainder of the division of the polynomial $g(x)$ by the polynomial $p_2(x)$. Hence we obtain:

$$\gamma \cdot \alpha^5 = (\gamma_2 + \gamma_1)x^3 + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_1 + \gamma_0)x^2 + (\gamma_2 + \gamma_0)x + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_2)$$

The operations of addition between the coefficients γ_i are binary additions and consequently can be performed with logic gates of the exor type.

Likewise, for the multiplication by α^{10} we have:

$$\gamma \cdot \alpha^{10} = (\gamma_3 + \gamma_2 + \gamma_1)x^3 + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_2 + \gamma_1 + \gamma_0)x^2 + (\gamma_2 + \gamma_1 + \gamma_0)x + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_2 + \gamma_0)$$

Consequently, the multiplications by α^5 and α^{10} in $GF(16)$ can be performed with the circuits illustrated, respectively, in Figures 4a and 4b.

5 Exploiting, instead, the representation of Table III, the multiplication of γ by α^5 is described by the following polynomial:

$$\gamma \cdot \alpha^5 = (\gamma_3 + \gamma_1 + \gamma_0)x^3 + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_2 + \gamma_1)x^2 + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_2 + \gamma_1 + \gamma_0)x + (\gamma_2 + \gamma_1 + \gamma_0)$$

and the multiplication of γ by α^{10} is described by

$$\gamma \cdot \alpha^{10} = (\gamma_1 + \gamma_0)x^3 + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_1)x^2 + (\gamma_3 + \gamma_2 + \gamma_0)x + (\gamma_2 + \gamma_1)$$

10 The corresponding multiplication circuits are illustrated, respectively, in Figures 5a and 5b.

Note that it is not always necessary to use an exor for each “+” sign between the coefficients in the equation that provides the product. In fact the additions, even if they are in different positions, can involve the same coefficients, and it is consequently possible
15 to reduce the number of logic gates.

From a comparison of Figures 4a, 4b and 5a, 5b, it appears evident that, as far as the multiplication by the element α^5 is concerned, the first representation requires a smaller number of exor gates (five as against six).

To obtain an error-control code on $GF(q^s)$ with given specifications in terms
20 of k and t that can be used also on $GF(q)$, it is first necessary to calculate the generating matrix (or the parity-control matrix) of a code on $GF(q)$. To obtain the matrix, we can resort to a known family of codes, such as the Hamming codes and the BCH codes (for a detailed treatment of the subject, see, for example, S. Benedetto, E. Biglieri, V. Castellani, *Digital Transmission Theory*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs (New Jersey), 1987).

25 Next, the matrix obtained is abbreviated to the desired value of k . For the abbreviation of the matrix, it is necessary to take into consideration the possible representations of $GF(q^s)$ on $GF(2)$ and evaluate which of these enables the circuit blocks

that occupy the smallest area to be implemented. Once the representation has been chosen, it is possible to proceed to the abbreviation of the code by eliminating the columns of the parity-control matrix which contain the greatest number of symbols of $GF(q^s)$ for which the multiplication is more costly in terms of area occupied.

- 5 Returning to the example considered previously, the generating matrix G_1 was obtained by abbreviating the generating matrix of the Hamming code (21, 18) on $GF(4)$. To minimize the number of logic gates that form the encoding circuit, the abbreviation must proceed with the intent of minimizing the number of symbols 2 and 3 (i.e., α^5 and α^{10}). After the binary polynomial for the binary representation of $GF(16)$ has
10 been chosen, it is possible to determine which symbol between α^5 and α^{10} requires the lower number of logic gates. This symbol is to be preferred during abbreviation.

- In the example considered, by choosing as primitive polynomial for the construction of $GF(16)$ the polynomial $p_2(x)$, the terms in α^5 that require 5 exor gates as against the 6 exor gates required by the multiplication by α^{10} are to be preferred. The most
15 convenient generating matrix in terms of saving on area is found to be the matrix G_2 written above. Instead, exploiting the representation of $GF(16)$ obtained by means of the polynomial $p_3(x)$, it is more advantageous to use the matrix G_3 indicated below, since in this case the multiplication by $\alpha^{10}=A$ requires five exor gates as against the six exor gates of $\alpha^5=B$.

20 $G_3 =$
$$\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & B \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & A \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & B \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & A \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & B \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & B \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & A \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 & A \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 & A \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 & A \end{pmatrix}$$

In general, then, given the values of k and t , the procedure to follow for constructing an error-control code that is able to operate on memory cells operating with a number of levels that can assume all the values of the set $\{b^{a_1}, b^{a_1 a_2}, \dots, b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h}\}$, with b, a_1, \dots, a_h positive integers, is the following (see also the flowchart illustrated in Figure 6):

- 5 1. Once $k, t, b^{a_1}, b^{a_1 a_2}, \dots, b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h}$, which represent the design specifications of the error-control code that it is desired to obtain, have been acquired (block 10), calculate the minimum value of n such that the Hamming limit defined by the relation (1) given above is satisfied (block 20).

2. Given n and k , calculate the maximum values of n and k , denoted
10 hereinafter-respectively by \hat{n} and \hat{k} , which satisfy the Hamming limit for $q=b^{a_1}, t$ and $(\hat{n}-\hat{k})=(n-k)$ (block 30).

In other words, since the value of n calculated in the preceding point-using relation (1) represents the number of symbols of a code word of an abbreviated q -ary linear code, and since, consequently, the $n-k$ parity symbols of said abbreviated linear code
15 represent the minimum number of control symbols required for the code to have the correction capacity t , in point 2 relation (1) is again used to calculate, given the values of n and k of the abbreviated q -ary linear code, the values \hat{n} and \hat{k} of the corresponding non-abbreviated q -ary linear code.

3. Determine the generating matrix of the abbreviated code (\hat{n}, \hat{k}) on
20 $GF(b^{a_1})$ with t given (block 40).

4. Construct the exponential representations of the fields $GF(b^{a_1}), GF(b^{a_1 a_2}), \dots, GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ (block 50).

5. On the basis of the exponential representations referred to in the previous point, identify the elements of the field $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ that also form part of the
25 fields $GF(b^{a_1}), GF(b^{a_1 a_2}), \dots, GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ (block 60).

In particular, the elements of $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ that also form part of $GF(b^{a_1}), GF(b^{a_1 a_2}), \dots, GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ are the ones that have a multiplicity of, respectively, $b^{a_1}, b^{a_1 a_2}, \dots, b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h}$. In the specific example considered previously, the elements of $GF(16)$ that form part of $GF(4)$ are the symbols $0, 1, \alpha^5$ and α^{10} , in that they are the only ones that have a

multiplicity equal to four, *i.e.*, they are the only ones that, multiplied four times by themselves, yield a result that is always the same.

In addition, it is emphasized that in the literature the definition of multiplicity is not unique. In particular, in some texts it is defined, as in this treatment, as the number of times that an element of the finite-element field must be multiplied by itself to obtain the element itself once again, whilst in other texts the multiplicity is a linear function of said number. Consequently, the identification of the elements of $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ that also form part of $GF(b^{a_1})$, $GF(b^{a_2})$, ..., $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ can also be made using a definition of multiplicity different from the one used in this treatment, without thereby modifying, in any way, what has been described.

6. Next, establish the biunique correspondences between the elements of the field $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ and the elements of the fields $GF(b^{a_1})$, $GF(b^{a_2})$, ..., $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ isomorphic to them, identified in the previous point (block 70), and then substitute each of the elements of the generating matrix on $GF(b^{a_1})$ referred to in point 3 with the corresponding isomorphic element belonging to $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$, thus obtaining a multipurpose generating matrix which, together with the biunique correspondences between the elements of the fields $GF(b^{a_1})$, $GF(b^{a_2})$, ..., $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ referred to above, and the elements of the field $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ that are isomorphic to them, defines the desired multipurpose error-control code (block 80).

In particular, to establish the biunique correspondences between the elements of the fields $GF(b^{a_1})$, $GF(b^{a_2})$, ..., $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ and the elements of the field $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ isomorphic to them, first construct the binary polynomial representations of all the fields $GF(b^{a_1})$, $GF(b^{a_2})$, ..., $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ by means of respective primitive polynomials respectively of degree a_1 , a_2 , $a_1 a_2$, ..., $a_1 a_2 \dots a_h$ on $GF(2)$, through which to each element of $GF(b^{a_1})$, $GF(b^{a_2})$, ..., $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ there is associated a corresponding binary polynomial of lower degree than the respective base, *i.e.*, to each element of $GF(b^{a_1})$ there is associated a corresponding binary polynomial of a degree lower than a_1 , to each element of $GF(b^{a_2})$ there is associated a corresponding binary polynomial of degree lower than a_2 , and so

forth up to $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$, to each element of which there is associated a corresponding binary polynomial of degree lower than $a_1 a_2 \dots a_h$.

The biunique correspondences between the elements of the field $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ and the elements of the fields $GF(b^{a_1})$, $GF(b^{a_2})$, ..., $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ that are isomorphic to them are consequently established using these binary polynomial representations, in the way described in what follows.

For each element of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ isomorphic to an element of $GF(b^{a_1})$, a first binary word is formed with the coefficients of the unknown terms of the binary polynomial associated to the element of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$, and this binary word is converted into the base b^{a_1, \dots, a_h} to obtain a first symbol; next, a second binary word is formed with the coefficients of the unknown terms of the binary polynomial associated to the element of $GF(b^{a_1})$, and this binary word is converted into a figure in the base b^{a_1} , so obtaining a second symbol; the two symbols thus obtained define the biunique correspondence sought between the element of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ and the element of $GF(b^{a_1})$ isomorphic to it.

Repeating what has been described above for all the elements of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ isomorphic to the elements of $GF(b^{a_1})$, for all the elements of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ isomorphic to the elements of $GF(b^{a_2})$, and so forth up to all the elements of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ isomorphic to the elements of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$, the biunique correspondences sought between the elements of the field $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ and the elements of the fields $GF(b^{a_1})$, $GF(b^{a_2})$, ..., $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ that are isomorphic to them are obtained.

- In the specific example considered previously (see Table I), the symbol corresponding to each of the four elements 0, 1, α^5 and α^{10} is none other than the representation in hexadecimal base of the binary word formed by the coefficients of the unknown terms of the binary polynomial associated to said element.

In the case where there are a number of elements of the subfield that have the same multiplicity, the association between these elements and the isomorphic ones of the corresponding subfield can be made by resorting to the polynomial representation of the field $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ obtained with polynomials constructed on the subfield.

For example, if a number of elements of the subfield $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$, with $i \leq h$, have the same multiplicity, then the association between these elements of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ and the elements of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_i})$ isomorphic to them can be made by constructing the polynomial representation of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ on $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_i})$; i.e., it can be obtained by means of a primitive polynomial of degree $a_{i+1} \dots a_h$ on $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_i})$. This polynomial representation automatically yields the association sought.

In the specific example considered previously in this treatment (see once again Table I), there are two elements of $GF(4)$ that have a multiplicity of four: these elements are α^5 and α^{10} . Consequently, the binary polynomial representations of $GF(16)$ and $GF(4)$ alone are not sufficient for establishing whether the exact correspondence is $2 \rightarrow 6$ and $3 \rightarrow 7$ or $2 \rightarrow 7$ and $3 \rightarrow 6$. By means, however, of the polynomial representation of $GF(16)$ on $GF(4)$, the correct association is automatic, as illustrated in Table I.

As regards, instead, the substitution of the elements of the generating matrix of $GF(b^{a_1})$ with the corresponding isomorphic element belonging to $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$, this is done using the symbols, in base b^{a_1} and b^{a_1, \dots, a_h} , representing the elements of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ isomorphic to the elements of $GF(b^{a_1})$.

In particular, each of the symbols in the base b^{a_1} present in the generating matrix on $GF(b^{a_1})$ is substituted with the corresponding symbol in the base b^{a_1, \dots, a_h} , thus obtaining a multipurpose generating matrix that defines an error-control code that can be used with memory cells the storage levels of which can assume the values of the set $\{b^{a_1}, b^{a_1 a_2}, \dots, b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h}\}$.

7. Now determine, for each element of the multipurpose generating matrix (representing a corresponding element of $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$), the number of logic gates required for carrying out the operation of multiplication associated to said element, resorting to the binary polynomial representation (block 90).

8. Abbreviate the multipurpose generating matrix obtained to the value of k initially specified, minimizing the number of elements of $GF(b^{a_1 a_2 \dots a_h})$ that require the largest number of logic gates (block 100).

In other words, since the generating matrix is $G=[I, P]$ with \hat{k} rows and \hat{n} columns, where I is the matrix identity of dimension \hat{k} whilst P is a matrix $\hat{k} \times (\hat{n} - \hat{k})$, the rows of the matrix P containing elements that require the largest number of logic gates are eliminated, until an abbreviated generating matrix is obtained having a number of rows
5 equal to the value of k specified in Point 1.

9. From the abbreviated multipurpose generating matrix thus obtained it is possible to generate the encoding and decoding circuits in the customary way, described, for example, in the aforementioned *Error-Correcting Codes* and *Theory and Practice of Error Control Codes*. This matrix always generates a code on $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$: when the cells
10 operate with b^a levels, the error-control code generated by the abbreviated multipurpose generating matrix is an error-control code on $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ isomorphic to an error-control code on $GF(b^a)$ that satisfies the initial requirements, whereas when the cells operate with
 b^{a_1, \dots, a_h} levels and $1 < i < h$, the error-control code generated by the abbreviated multipurpose generating matrix is an error-control code on $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ isomorphic to an error-control
15 code on $GF(b^{a_1, \dots, a_h})$ that satisfies the initial requirements, and so forth (block 110).

Figures 7 and 8 show two block diagrams representing the operations of encoding, storage and decoding of an information word performed using a non-multipurpose error-control code according to the prior art and, respectively, a multipurpose error-control code according to the present invention.

20 As may be noted from an analysis of Figure 7, the implementation of a non-multipurpose error-control method according to the prior art operating on memory cells operating only with 2^r storage levels (*i.e.*, storing r bits) envisages the use of an encoder 120 that adds, to the k 2^r -ary symbols of the input information words ($n-k$), 2^r -ary symbols for error control. The code words thus obtained are entered into the memory matrix 122,
25 and are read therefrom by means of known write and read circuits 124, 126 that carry out writing and reading of n memory cells with 2^r storage levels in one cycle.

The words read are then decoded by a decoder 128 which, on the basis of the n 2^r -ary symbols of the word read, carries out error control and returns, at output, words of k 2^r -ary symbols that are the estimation of the original information words.

As may be noted, instead, from a comparison of Figure 8 with Figure 7, the implementation of a multipurpose error-control method according to the present invention, operating on memory cells operating with 2^{sr} storage levels (for example, with $s=1$ or $s=2$ and r fixed, memory cells storing r bits or $2r$ bits, respectively), envisages the use of an input transcoder 130 that receives at input a control signal S indicating the number of storage levels at which the memory cells operate and then converts, symbol by symbol, groups of sr bits into groups of $2r$ bits on the basis of given biunique correspondences; *i.e.*, it converts, symbol by symbol, the information words from the base in which they are represented, which is equal to the number of storage levels at which the memory cells operate, to a base equal to the maximum number of storage levels of the memory cells, using the aforesaid biunique correspondences.

An encoder 132 then adds, to the $k 2^{2r}$ -ary symbols of the input information words $(n-k)$, 2^{2r} -ary symbols for error control. The code words thus obtained are written into the memory matrix 134 and are read therefrom by means of known writing and reading circuits 136, 138, which receive at input the aforesaid control signal S and carry out writing and reading of n memory cells with 2^{sr} storage levels in one cycle.

The words read are then decoded by means of a decoder 140, which, on the basis of the $n 2^{2r}$ -ary symbols of the word read, carries out error control and returns, at output, words of $k 2^{2r}$ -ary symbols that are the estimation of the original information words.

Finally, an output transcoder 142, which also receives at input the aforesaid control signal S , converts, symbol by symbol, groups of $2r$ bits into groups of sr bits, performing the inverse conversion with respect to the input transcoder 120; *i.e.*, it converts, symbol by symbol, the decoded words, from a base equal to the maximum number of storage levels of said memory cells into a base equal to the number of storage levels at which the memory cells operate, using the aforesaid biunique correspondences.

From an examination of the characteristics of the multipurpose method of error-correction obtained according to the present invention the advantages afforded thereby emerge clearly.

In particular, the error-control code constructed in the way described above presents the capacity of controlling error in multilevel memory cells operating with a variable number of storage levels, using the same circuit blocks.

In addition, the error-control code constructed in the way described above
5 presents the maximum level of reliability in every operating mode and enables a better exploitation of the memory cells used for the control, whilst the additional area required on the silicon is minimal and there is practically no additional delay time.

Finally, it is clear that modifications and variations can be made to the method of construction and to the multipurpose error-control method described and
10 illustrated herein, without thereby departing from the sphere of protection of the present invention, as defined in the attached claims.